6: Lane T-3 (no date) 1923 EG1 Albania EG1

"I should say they're patient!" cried Frances. "Perolli, if you don't tell them we are simply dying of hunger, I will! It's almost two o'clock in the morning. Do they think we are made of—cast iron? I want something to eat, and I want to go to sleep. Do they intend to talk until morning?"

"It is the custom, when strangers come, to talk to them," said Perolli, severely. "Their only way of hearing news, and their only entertainment, is talking to guests. If you want to be rude about eating and sleeping, go ahead; I won't."

"Oh, all right," Frances relented, sadly. "Perolli, do you believe in ora?"

"Well—do you believe in heaven and hell, and God and the devil? There are lots of things in the world that you don't see or touch. I don't know——" He said, briskly, "Of course I don't believe in ora!" He wavered again. "But when you know so many people who have seen them and talked with them—I mean, who think they have—— Everyone used to believe such things, long ago, and perhaps, here in these mountains, where the people have changed so little through all the centuries, there may still be things—spirits, phantoms, whatever you like to call them. Understand, I don't believe it. But there may be something in that myth that's part of every religion, that there was a time when there were other beings on earth besides men. And if there were once, why then, if we could

7: Amery G-5 (1943-44) 1948 EG1 Albania EG1

574 storied house, where a score of Zogist guerillas were gathered
[342] round the fire. The room was filled with smoke — for the house had no chimney, like many in Albânia — and it was several minutes before I could see or breathe in comfort. I sat down, however, by the hearth, where a carpet had been spread, and while the evening meal was made ready had some talk with Petrit. He spoke quite good French, having studied in the French *lycée* at Korcha, where, by a strange irony, Enver Hoja had been his teacher. He was obviously eager for news of the outside world, and the flow of his questions was only restrained by his sense of courtesy as my host. In appearance he was not unlike his father, though of sturdier build and more slothful movements; and I was told that he had already distinguished himself in the previous autumn's fighting. He was possessed besides of a natural authority, and, despite his youth, seemed to command the respect of the wild mountaineers who accompanied him. Some of these spoke a little Italian or Serb, and their discussions that night gave me a first impression of
● [521] Zogist public opinion. The Ghegs are not great talkers like the Greeks or Slavs, but I felt, from what they said, that they were rather suspicious of British intentions and far more concerned with preventing the spread of Communism in Albania than with fighting the Germans. Towards one o'clock
[262] our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the evening meal of soup, boiled mutton and cheese. We ate in silence
[513] and as soon as we had finished I retired to rest on one of the mattresses which the master of the house had spread for us on the floor.

342 Next day, in the afternoon, Petrit accompanied me to the place where Abas Kupi had made his temporary headquarters. It was a grey stone keep, built on a jutting rib of the mountain range and approached by a path so narrow and precipitous that I had to send back my horse and make the last stage of the journey on foot. Abas Kupi came out to meet me, as I turned
[516] into the walled courtyard of the house, and welcomed me with the traditional greeting of "*Tungjatjeta*" — "May your life be prolonged". He led the way up a flight of wooden steps, resting like a ladder against the wall of the house, and took

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me by the hand into a dark and dusty room, hung with rifles and submachine-guns. It was thronged with Zogist notables and their bodyguards: wild and rugged men, corrugated with cartridge-belts, and festooned with pistols, daggers, and hand-grenades. Most of them were dressed in black, baggy Turkish breeches, braided homespun jackets of black or brown, with multicoloured sashes wound about their waists, and white fezes or skull-caps on their heads. A few besides were in uniform retained from the time of their service in the Albanian army, or looted from the Italians; while others, especially the leaders, wore tweed or leather jackets, variously combined with local or military costume.

We sat down, Turkish fashion, by the fire; and, while we drank coffee and exchanged greetings, the guerillas milled around, or sat together in small groups, whispering intently. To a stranger this whispering seemed sinister and blatantly conspiratorial, but the others took no offence at it. Necessity indeed imposed a communal way of life on the guerillas; each man was watched by his fellows in his every movement, and it was only by whispering that any privacy of discussion could be preserved.

I had been there perhaps half an hour when, at a sign from Abas Kupi, the guerillas filed out of the room, and we remained alone with Shaqir, my interpreter, and Colonel Murad Basha. Basha had been a regular officer under King Zog and had joined Abas Kupi in Belgrade in 1940. He was now the Zogist Chief-of-Staff, but struck me from the first as pedantic and too quick to see the difficulties in any scheme. He was indeed to prove a defeatist influence at the Zogist Headquarters, for, though personally no coward, he was terrified of action, like so many senior officers who have won their spurs on the square rather than in the field.

I began our discussions by showing Abas Kupi my credentials: these were a letter from Stirling, who had been his friend, and a *besa* given me by King Zog. This was a covenant enjoining upon all Albanians the duty of protecting my life and, should their zeal prove unavailing, of avenging my death. My *bona fides* thus established I recalled our meeting in Belgrade

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meat, and, since several hours might pass before the sheep or kid had been killed and made ready, it was often past midnight before we had eaten.

While the meal was cooking we variously slept or talked and let the bodyguards dry damp clothes by the fire or massage our weary limbs. Sometimes, to beguile the time, one of the company would recite from the long epic poems in which the Albanians record the exploits of their heroes. They were weird, monotonous laments, sung in a high-pitched nasal voice to the accompaniment of a one-stringed mandolin. An hour or so before the meal was served flasks of *raki* would be brought, accompanied by *mese* of onions, cheese, and sometimes hard-boiled eggs or lumps of grilled meat. *Raki* is a fiery, colourless spirit, made from the pulp of grapes, or sometimes, like *slivovitz*, from plums. Among the mountaineers it was usually home-brewed, and varied greatly in quality and strength. The principal guests would each receive a small flask, the shape of an old-fashioned burgundy flagon, and holding perhaps half a pint, while the rest of the company fared according to the resources of the host, sharing a flask between two or three. Toasts were drunk to the traditional greeting of " *Tungjatjeta* " — " May your life be prolonged " ; and, though the mountaineers habitually drank to excess, they seldom failed to comport themselves with grave, if sometimes mellowed, dignity.

When the cooking was done Maclean, as the chief guest, would be asked if the meal might be served ; there was never conversation after meals, and so the greatest compliment which he could pay his host and fellows was to ask for a postponement. As soon, however, as he had given his assent, a circular wooden table some five feet in diameter would be carried in, standing about six inches from the ground. Round this a dozen of us would assemble, sitting cross-legged, but in a crocodile, each sideways on to the table so as to make room for as many as possible. We would then each be given a spoon as our sole piece of cutlery and with this helped ourselves to the more liquid dishes at the centre of the table. There were no plates, so that each spoon plied steadily backwards and forwards